

**Observations on Electrotransport in Thin Aluminum Films
Using Resistance Measurements**

R. E. HUMMEL and H. M. BREITLING

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(Z. Naturforsch. 26 a, 36--39 [1971]; received 6 October 1970)

Resistance measurements of five different portions of uncoated and partially SiO-overcoated aluminum stripes are reported. In specimens of both types the resistance increases at the cathode when the stripe is subjected to high current densities. In partially coated specimens the resistance decreases at the anode whereas it remains constant in the uncoated sample. The difference in behavior at the anode between coated and uncoated specimens is interpreted as being due to differences of ion accumulation: In the uncoated films hillocks are formed whereas in the specimen with partial overcoat the ions accumulate more evenly. Scanning-electron micrographs are shown to support this interpretation.

Introduction

Electromigration phenomena in thin metallic films have recently received considerable attention mainly because they are a potential cause of failure of integrated circuit metallization. Another reason for the interest in electrotransport in thin films is that basic studies can be extended to much higher current densities without producing large joule heating. It is widely assumed that mass transport in thin films under the influence of a d.c. electric field is mainly governed by grain-boundary diffusion¹⁻⁵. This concept has recently received substantial support. When the film consists of a single crystal, no measurable ion movement is observed within the experimental period³. When large-grained stripes are subjected to high current densities the lifetime is longer than for fine-grained samples⁴. In polycrystalline films, gradients of temperature^{6,7}, of current density⁶, or of grain size⁴ are assumed to be the main causes of the breakdown of a film. Temperature- and current-density gradients are

usually produced by the sample geometry. It must be emphasized, however, that failures were also observed to occur in regions where the macroscopic temperature is constant⁴.

Experimental evidence exists⁵ to support the theory that in the early stage of electromigration, ions are transported along the stripe, whereas in the final stage growth of visible voids and catastrophic failure occur. In aluminum, holes form whenever the electrons flow in a direction of increasing temperature, i. e., predominantly at the cathode, whereas growths (hillocks and whiskers) are created where the electrons flow in a direction of decreasing temperature, i. e., predominantly at the anode⁸⁻¹². (In thin silver films, holes form predominantly at the anode and cause the film to fail on this side¹³.) It seems, however, to be necessary to consider that void and hillock formation are not necessarily interconnected, since hillocks are also observed to form in the absence of an electric field; for example, when the temperature of the film is simply increased¹⁴⁻¹⁶. These thermal growths are

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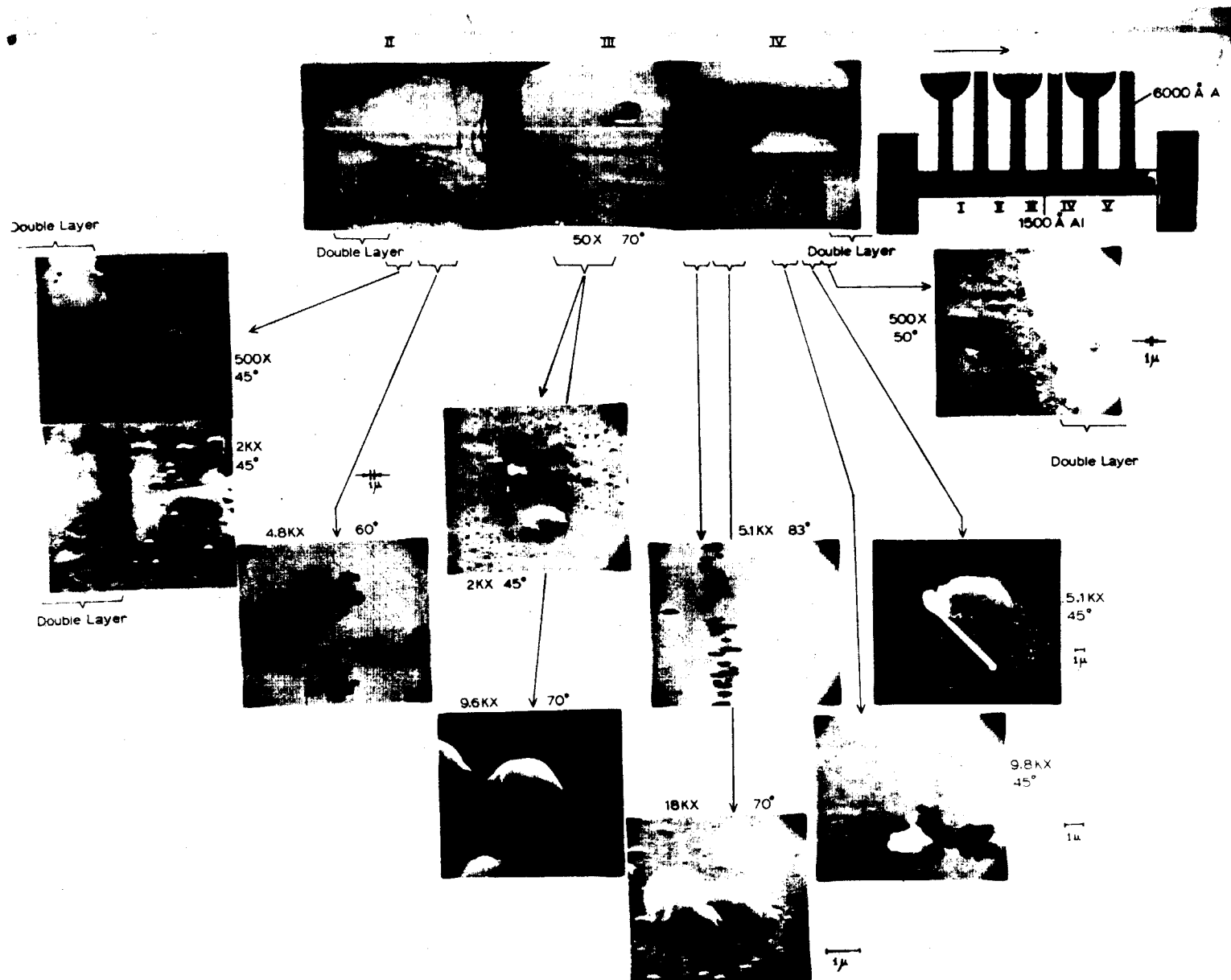


Fig. 2. Scanning electron micrographs of an aluminum sample which was subjected to a current density of 5×10^5 A/cm².

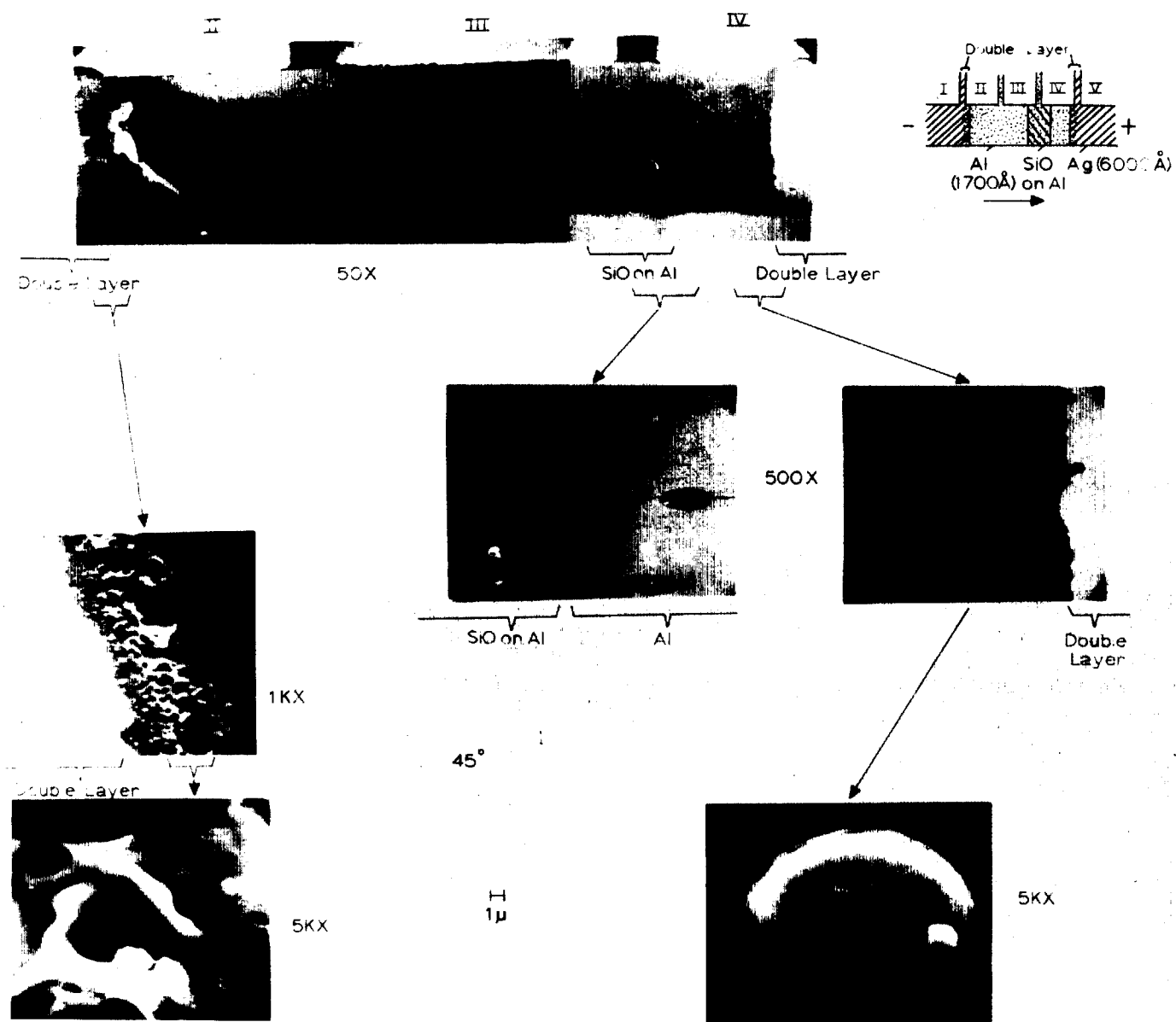


Fig. 5. Scanning electron micrographs of an aluminum stripe which was partially coated with silicon monoxide. $j = 4.5 \times 10^5 \text{ A/cm}^2$.

believed to form because of the different thermal expansion coefficients of film and substrate. The hillocks grow on materials which are under compressive stress.

Investigations of ion movement in thin films under the influence of a d.c. electric field are generally performed employing optical-, electron-, and scanning-electron-microscopy. Resistance measurements have the advantage that structural changes in the film are noticeable well before voids can be observed visually. In some investigations the overall resistance of a thin-film stripe was measured when an electric field was applied^{5,17}. This type of measurement is not well suited for detailed studies, however, because it averages the effects of all local disturbances. In order to obtain information about the changes in various regions along a stripe, it is therefore advantageous to attach to the stripe thin potential probes and to measure the individual resistance of each region. Several possible sample designs have been described¹⁸. The present paper discusses some recent findings which were obtained using this improved technique.

Experimental Procedure

Thin film samples were made by depositing 99.999 per cent pure aluminum from tungsten filaments through chemically milled masks on glass substrates at room temperature in high vacuum (10^{-6} Torr). The rate of deposition was approximately 50 \AA per second, and the distance between source and substrate was 20 cm. The silver electrodes were evaporated from a tungsten boat. Silver of 99.999 per cent purity was used and was deposited at a rate of approximately 100 \AA per second. Silicon monoxide (purity 99.999%) was evaporated in high vacuum from a baffled chimney tantalum source.

As described elsewhere¹⁸ the specimens consisted of a central gage section of aluminum between two partially overlapping silver electrodes. Potential leads allowed measurement of the resistance in five different portions of the sample. During the electrotransport experiment the specimen was placed in a styrofoam container in order to avoid temperature fluctuations. A temperature reading was taken with a small thermocouple on the substrate near the middle of the sample. The temperature at the center of the specimen was about 10 degrees higher than the temperature read on the substrate.

Results and Discussion

In Fig. 1, typical resistance changes in five different areas of an aluminum stripe, and the temperature reading on the sample, are plotted versus time. The positive temperature gradient in area II

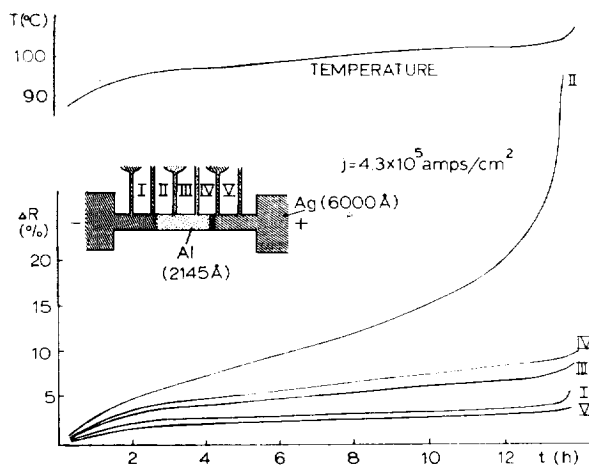


Fig. 1. Resistance change and temperature of an aluminum sample with silver electrodes versus time.

(cathode) promotes nucleation of vacancies and growth of voids. As a result, the resistance in this area increases substantially with time until a fuse-type effect causes the specimen to fail after about 14 hours. The resistance in the other areas changes only very little if at all when the temperature increase is taken into consideration. It is concluded therefore that the ions which are removed from their initial positions by momentum exchange are likely to be deposited in a manner such that they give no contribution to the conductivity. In area IV (anode) especially one would expect that material is accumulated because of the negative temperature gradient. As mentioned in the introduction and as can be seen from Fig. 2*, the ions pile up in the form of isolated hillocks; this is why they do not contribute to electrical conduction.

In another series of experiments, a silicon monoxide layer was deposited on a small portion near the center of the aluminum stripes. Figures 3 and 4 show the curves of resistance versus time for samples of this type. These curves represent specimens subjected to various current densities.

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* Figs. 2 and 5 on p. 36 a, b.

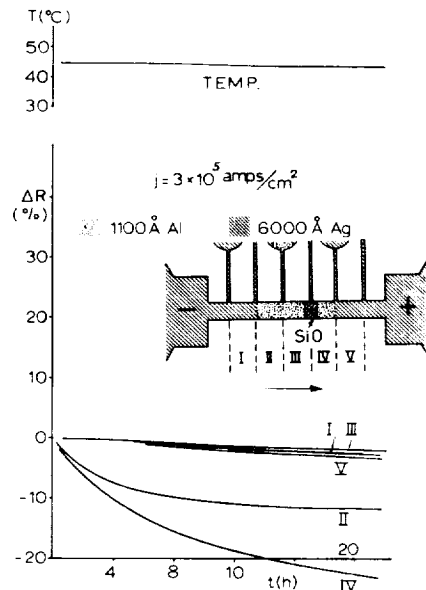


Fig. 3. Resistance change and temperature of a thin aluminum stripe which was partially coated with silicon monoxide. Current density $j = 3 \times 10^5 \text{ A/cm}^2$.

The partial SiO-overcoat causes the resistance in area IV (and later also in area III) to drop considerably. The average lifetimes of the specimens

were enhanced by a factor of 10 compared to uncoated samples. (The experiment with the specimen of Fig. 3 was terminated prior to failure.) One possible explanation for the resistance drop in areas IV and III is that in these regions material is deposited in a way which increases the overall cross-sectional area of the stripe. This would suggest that no or only a few hillocks are formed here. Scanning-electron micrographs of partially coated samples support this assumption. In Fig. 5, no hillock-type growths can be seen neither in the coated nor in the uncoated area. The number of disk-shaped accumulation, however, has increased compared to uncoated stripes (Fig. 2).

The effect of a dielectric overcoat on aluminum films has been studied also by other investigators^{6, 19}. The dielectrics used by these authors were amorphous mixtures of SiO_2 and Al_2O_3 or mixtures of SiO_2 and P_2O_5 ¹⁹. Occasionally SiO_2 was used⁶. The difference between these earlier studies and the present work, however, is that the previous investigators coated the entire stripe whereas in the present work only a small portion was coated. BLACK⁶ observed a longer lifetime of his specimens and calculated a higher activation energy for electromigra-

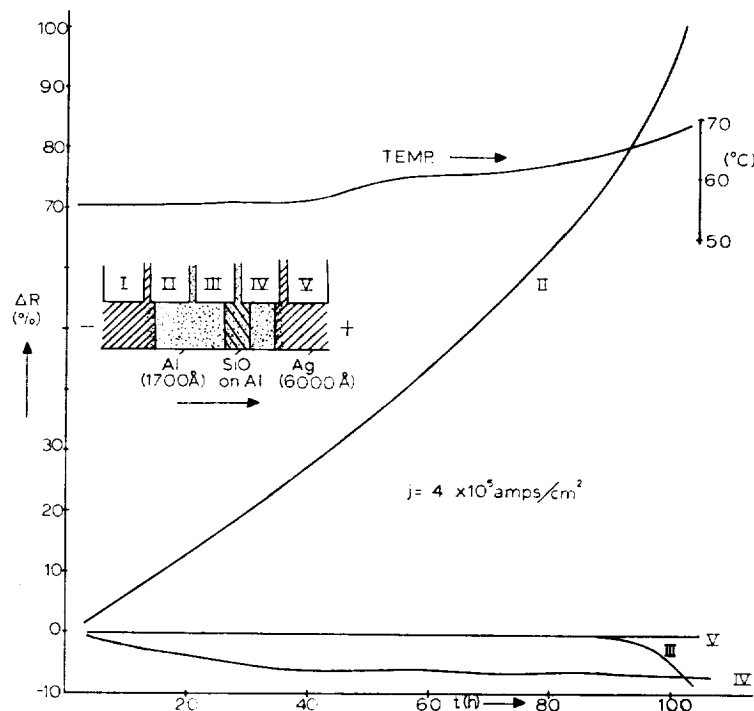


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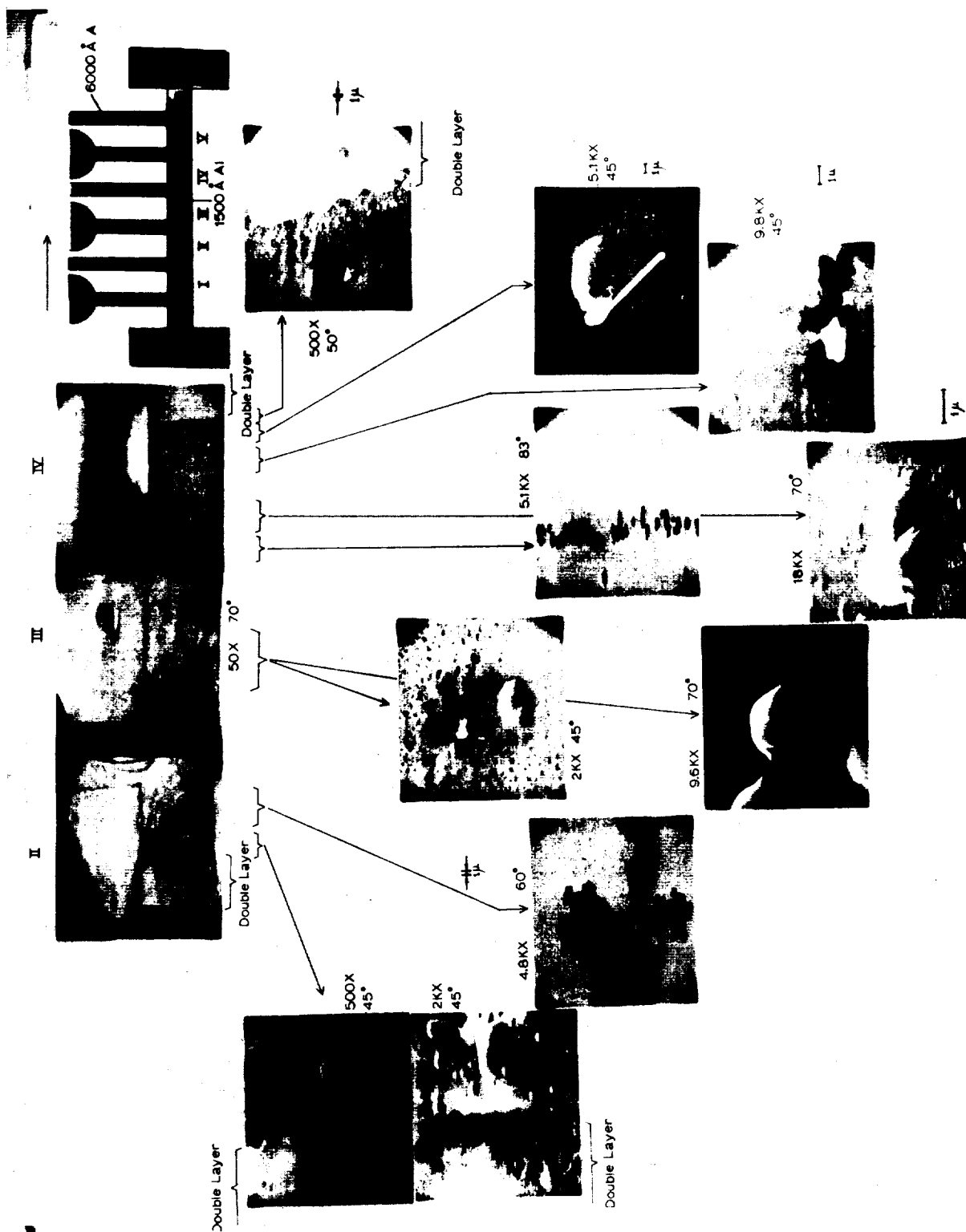


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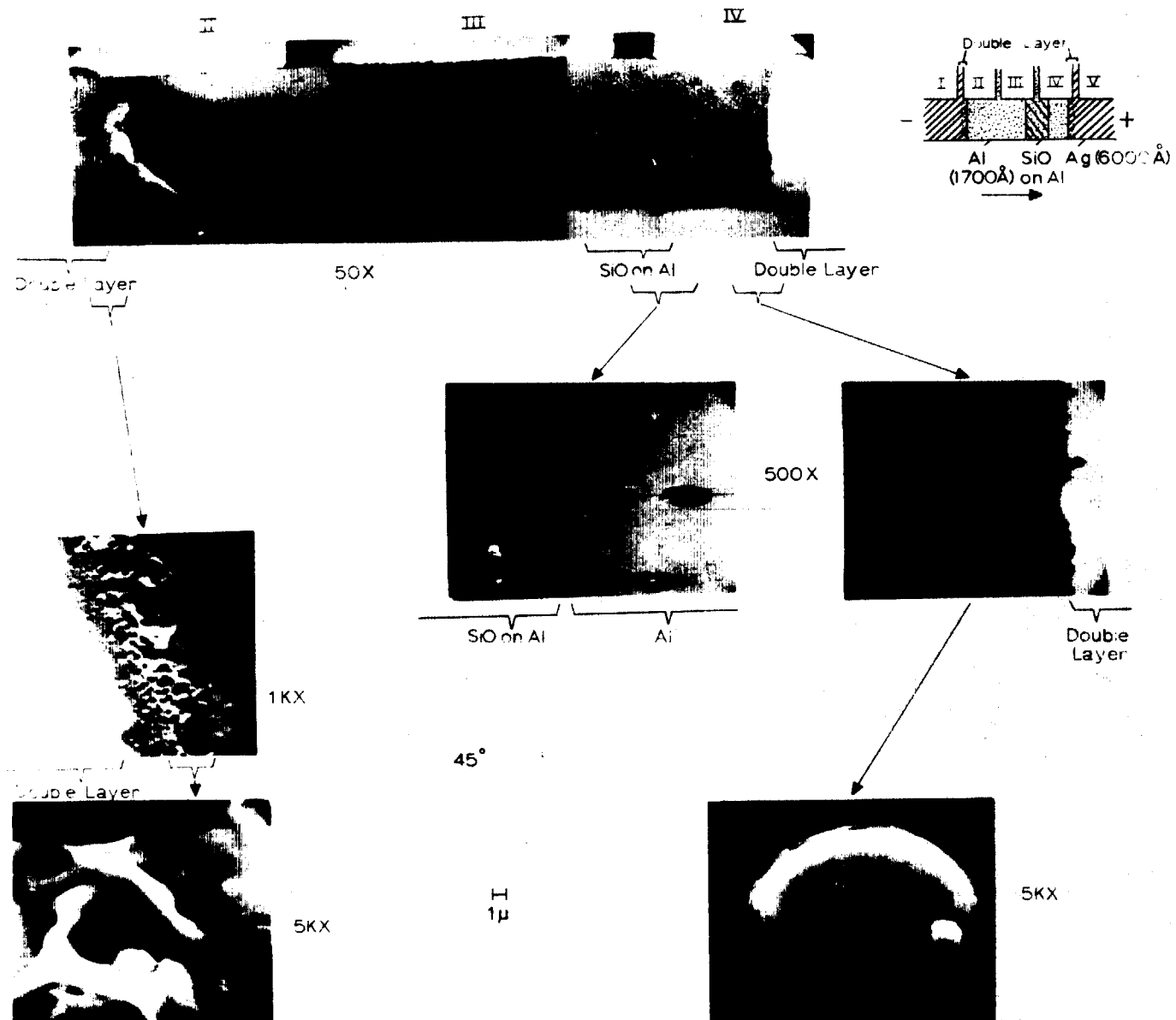


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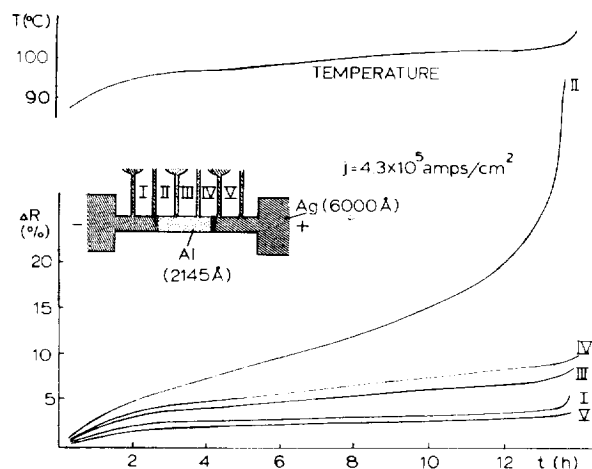


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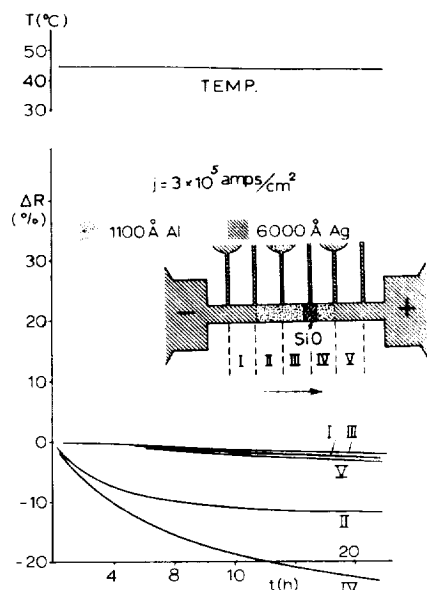


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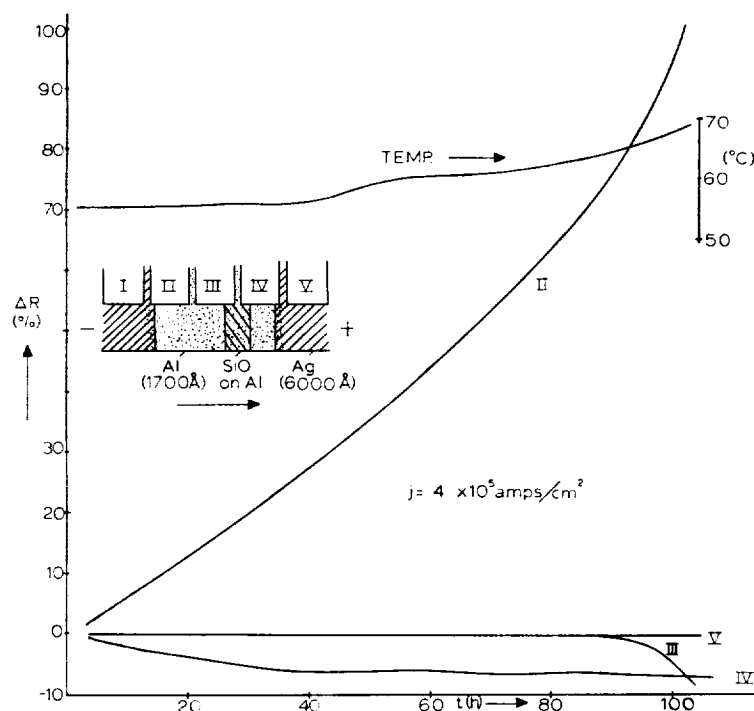


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